



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

(Review of) Saying It With Songs: Popular Music and the Coming of Sound to Hollywood Cinema. By Katherine Spring. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 229 pp. ISBN 978-0-199-84222-3

Citation for published version:

Davison, A 2015, '(Review of) Saying It With Songs: Popular Music and the Coming of Sound to Hollywood Cinema. By Katherine Spring. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 229 pp. ISBN 978-0-199-84222-3', *Popular Music*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 325–328. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143015000070>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1017/S0261143015000070](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143015000070)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Popular Music

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



***Saying It With Songs: Popular Music and the Coming of Sound to Hollywood Cinema.* By Katherine Spring. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 229pp. ISBN 978-0-19-984222-3**

In the years between the successes of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *King Kong* (1933), popular song exploded onto the movie screen, in terms of quantity, at least. In *Saying It With Songs*, Katherine Spring explores the first five years of this period (1927–31) tracing the relationship between the major Hollywood film studios and popular music publishers during the transition from “silent” to synchronized sound films. Meticulous archival study and an investigation of the contemporary trade press enable Spring to document the structural interrelations of the two industries and their institutions, illuminated by analyses of the place and function of popular song in films from the period. The book thus echoes the form and content of Jeff Smith’s *The Sounds of Commerce* (1998), but where the latter concerns an entire history of the marketing of popular music onscreen, Spring’s book has a more contained focus. This is not a criticism, however: during this brief experimental period the importance of rights ownership and exploitation in motion-picture music through the twentieth century was established. Through this micro-level history, Spring documents the shift from filmed revue and backstage musicals through to the preference for what is now known as classical Hollywood scoring in non-musical genres. The study is concerned primarily with non-musical films, and thus pays attention to the ways in which songs are motivated and/or integrated beyond the conventions of stage musicals (a genre distinction that was not always straightforward onscreen during the transition period),

Spring demonstrates the aggressive marketing techniques used to create desire for the songs of Tin Pan Alley, via their exploitation of sheet music, phonograph records and radio broadcasts. The emphasis on popular song in synch sound films was a logical consequence of the conflation of “entertainment and indirect production promotion” (21) to be found in broadcast (radio) advertising, and personality branding in sheet music and phonograph records. Hit theme songs emerged as the music industry slumped due to declining sales in sheet music and records (1927–28). But the popular ballad of the 1920s was also well suited to early sound films: the genre was popular (enabling cross-promotion); “its lyrics tended to summarize or reflect the dramatic themes of romance or nostalgia that pervaded so many mainstream films” (34); and the genre’s emphasis on “short, repetitive musical motifs” could be used in support of narrative/thematic elements of films.

From the mid- to late 1910s film exhibitors had to be persuaded that they now needed to pay for the performing right, which that they had previously enjoyed gratis. But, once established, revenue from the licensing of music to cinemas through to the 1920s helped to offset the losses from diminishing sheet music sales through the decade. The detailed discussion of the Mills Agreement between ERPI and ASCAP is edifying. It underestimated the “commercial power of the motion picture song”; there was no economic benefit to producers for any uplift in sales of sheet music or records of music they incorporated into their films, and performing rights still had to be negotiated for each film exhibited outside the USA and Canada. To benefit from the cross-promotion of popular music in their films, the majors needed to develop a mutually beneficial arrangement with the music publishers. So began a period of significant media convergence. Affiliations between motion picture majors and music publishers led to the creation of subsidiaries to publish motion picture songs. These were followed by larger deals where some studios acquired important popular music

publishing firms. Warner Bros. formed the Motion Picture Holding Company from its acquisitions, and as a result owned “the lion’s share of the American music publishing industry and song copyrights”, (58). By 1929 income from synch rights was greater than those earned from sales of sheet music and mechanicals for recordings.

The second half of the book concerns popular songs on screen in terms of the balance between their dual functions as “isolatable attractions and integrated devices of storytelling” (96). Chapter three concerns the promotion of popular songs onscreen via star-song identification within the context of earlier strategies of song plugging. Onscreen, star-song identification tended to emphasise songs as discrete attractions, isolated from narrative development, as did other forms of song plugging, such as aligning the performance of a song with the presentation of visual spectacle (thus also linked back to Broadways revues of 1920s). Spring explores the “glorifying” of Helen Morgan in *Applause* (1929) as exemplary of star-song identification onscreen, but of a type which is relatively well integrated into the narrative. By contrast, in the (apparent) sound debut of Richard Barthelmess in *Weary River* (1929), although character here too motivates the appearance of theme songs, in this film the depiction of the performance draws attention to Barthelmess as star and promotes the sale of songs as commercial objects.

But how could songs be interpolated when films did not feature fictionalised musicians/singers? Drawing on the notion of the “integrated attraction” identified by scholars of early cinema, in the next chapter Spring suggests an alternative approach to popular song placement that both disrupted audience engagement with the fiction, yet could simultaneously also “fulfil a variety of dramatic functions and uphold principles of classical narration.” (97) As attempts to justify the narrative conditions of songs proliferated, however, in some films of this era “the more carefully coordinated the motivation for songs, the greater the strain on narrative coherence” (98), resulting in foregrounding the popular song as “disruptive spectacle” (98).

From mid-1930 media divergence, rather than convergence, became the order of the day. Affiliated music publishing branches were closed, theme song use was decreased, and studios cut back the scale of their music departments dramatically, as well as their inflated salaries to songwriters. Although the stock market crash of October 1929 was a contributory factor in this shift, Spring explains that the decision was aesthetic as much as economic; audiences had tired of the “quantity and quality” of songs in films. The composers, orchestrators and arrangers who were retained in the studio music departments were skilled both “in the styles of light European classics and late 19th C Romantic idioms, and [in] writing in the popular song styles of the vaudeville and Broadway stages.” (128) The presence of songs needed to be justified, and in general, they were incorporated in convincing ways: “The soundtracks that resulted anticipated scoring practices that would become associated with the classical Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s.” (129)

For a brief period during the transition to synchronized sound, motion pictures offered the principal means of popular song exploitation, but as Spring argues, the more significant impact of the “industry’s response to the song glut was the clarification of the distinction between the musical and non-musical production” (144), which stabilized by the time Warner Bros. released its depression-era-musical-cycle two years later, in 1933. Borne from her PhD thesis, Katherine Spring narrative through this fascinating period of experimentation is persuasive. Spring writes with clarity, occasional (and welcome) flashes of wry humour, and the study is supported throughout by copious and thorough footnote references (though these are very slightly out of synch at the end of chapter three, p. 92). There are frequent summaries

of the argument throughout the book, which should make it relatively easy for individual chapters to stand on their own on reading lists. *Saying It With Songs* is rich, productive and detailed. It should be required reading for anyone interested in the history of film music and/or popular song.